THE ENIGMA PROJECT

by

Michael A. Frizzell

On one very cold March evening in 1978, members of the Odyssey Research group gathered for an informal meeting at the north Baltimore home of John Lutz, Odyssey's director. They were there to discuss topics of unexplained phenomena. The 15 people present had segregated into smaller groups, each spewing excited chatter in which the quickly belabored subjects changed like slides in a rushed presentation.

At one point, I noticed a clean-cut, dark-haired man, appearing to be in his early twenties, showing several 8X10 glossy photographs to Lutz. John seemed only casually interested in the man's pictures even though photographic evidence in paranormal research occasionally represented some value greater than zero. I became curious and began to noticeably eavesdrop on their conversation hoping that, on seeing my interest, John would invite me to meet his acquaintance. My ploy worked and Lutz introduced the man with the photos as Bob Lazzara, a local researcher with interests in parapsychology and cryptozoology.

As Lutz drifted away, I asked Bob what his pictures were all about. He proceeded to show me the series of Black and white photos which depicted large, seemingly three-toed, footprint-like tracks made in firm, 8 inch deep snow. Lazzara told me that each of the prints were 15 inches long, 6 inches wide, and were spaced at a stride of 5 feet, heel to toe. He took the pictures during the latter part of February, less than a month earlier, on Rocks Chrome Ridge, an imposing (then snow-covered) section of Rocks State Park located in Harford County, Maryland. Now very interested by what I was seeing, he continued by telling me that he and a friend had discovered the tracks after going to the Ridge on speculation. Bob was quite fortunate indeed, for prior to his discovery, he had been carefully analyzing a flurry of so-called "bigfoot" reports that had been coming from southern Pennsylvania, just north of the Maryland, during the latter portion of 1977 and first month or so of '78. He determined, through plotting the reports on a map, that the alleged sightings were moving steadily southward toward Harford County. Already aware of periodic Maryland Bigfoot sightings from earlier years, he theorized--based in part on that year's particularly brutal winter weather--that the alleged animal might migrate southward in search of better conditions and that, as a consequence, sightings would soon erupt in Maryland. His feelings were accurate as reports of large, hairy bipedal creatures soon began coming from the rural sections of Harford County. Not long after, as if on serendipity's cue, Bob went Rocks Park and found the strange tracks. Subsequently, he showed these photographs to scores of people, including wildlife authorities. They have never been explained.

As we left the Odyssey meeting Bob was bewildered because the group's members seemed largely indifferent toward his discovery. I told him that I was intrigued by what he had found. He then asked if I would like to join him for a return trip to Rocks Park for an in-depth look at where he found the tracks. Without hesitation I agreed and the next available weekend found us wandering through the deserted park. That particular trip back to the area

(though we made several subsequent to it) didn't reveal anything new regarding the footprints, but it did serve to bond our friendship.

During the few weeks that followed our initial meeting, Bob and I had many discussions about how investigations of various unexplained phenomena could be conducted. Although Odyssey Research (principally John Lutz) had a reputation for responsive and enthusiastic investigation of the unusual (mainly UFOs and "creature" sightings), Bob and I felt that his group did not suit our needs. As a result of that conclusion, we mutually came upon the idea of forming our own research group. The need for another such organization was apparent, as we were both aware that "establishment science" all-too-often overlooked, ignored, or otherwise deferred subjects that didn't neatly fit into the pigeon holes presided over by the fixed Laws of Nature and "conventional scientific wisdom." We knew that many skeptics regarded the "paranormal" as nothing more than a belabored, often embarrassing, word from the dictionary and never an actual state of being (i.e. the paranormal is always the normal misperceived). The tenet we preferred was: "...the paranormal may be the normal not yet understood." Bob and I shared the philosophy that unexplained phenomena should be studied with a scientific posture, the use of technical means, and most of all, the indispensable prerequisite: an open mind. Ideally, that state of mind had to always lie somewhere between gullibility and incredulity, remaining safely buffered from either extreme. We both knew that a responsible approach to the study of the paranormal meant finding the truth. We also knew that searching for the truth behind paranormal claims could result in the--sometimes resented--exploding of time-honored myths, the exposure of fraud or, ultimately, the reduction of the unexplained to explainable, natural levels of comprehension--the goal of a scientific inquiry.

In late April, 1978, we gave the Enigma Project its name and two of our objectives became the investigation and documentation of phenomena in Maryland, contiguous states and, in some instances, at remote locations. As an organization, we wanted Enigma's scope to remain general with individual members having experience or skills in specific phenomena. For example, Lazzara's specialty was parapsychology and related tangents. My areas of expertise were unidentified flying objects and mysterious lights (i.e. ghostlights). To lesser degrees, we were both knowledgeable in cryptozoology. In addition to Lazzara and myself, two other serious researchers, Pat Lofgren (inorganic chemist-now based in Ohio) and John Kopfle (chemical engineer-now based in North Carolina) were automatically part of the new group as they were closely allied to investigations I had initiated on the perplexing Brown Mountain Lights1 (North Carolina) prior to Enigma's conception. As time went on we gathered many more associates, worldwide, according to their skills and interests.

The Enigma Project was fashioned to deal with six general areas of unexplained phenomena. They were: UFOs, Parapsychology (ESP, hauntings, possessions, poltergeists, etc.), Cryptozoology, Spontaneous Human Combustion, Geologic Anomalies ("ringing rocks," "gravity hills," and the like), and Mysterious Lights. Furthermore, it was (and still is) our policy to act as a referral agency for paranormal situations which we felt might be more effectively handled by other authorities or associates outside of the Project proper. For instance, on learning of possible cases of spontaneous human combustion (SHC), the Enigma Project has routinely directed such information to Larry Arnold2, the foremost authority on SHC here in the United States.

When Enigma was born, Bob Lazzara and I were both employed in technical capacities. Bob was working as a Quality Appraiser (electromechanical) for the former AT&T subsidiary, Western Electric. And I was working as a Research Technician (materials science/chemical engineering) for W.R. Grace's, Washington Research Center. Our technical backgrounds helped us to see that some forms of paranormal phenomena had potential scientific value and should be subjected to rigorous scrutiny using whatever technical methods may be applicable. We knew that even the most seemingly bizarre anomalies would stand a better chance of being given serious attention by mainstream scientists if preliminary researchers' fieldwork produced reliable, accurate, and reproducible technical data (i.e. per the Scientific Method, when the results of an experiment are reproducible among independent investigators the originating hypothesis for that experiment earns validity).

From early on, Lazzara and I began considering ways to obtain technical data on phenomena. Through experience acquired earlier, Bob reviewed different photographic formats, films, and filters and decided that the larger 2 1/4 format cameras, in addition to the mainstay 35 mm types, were well suited for field work. Infrared film (black & white and color), with its unique ability to highlight near-infrared energy emissions and heat sources, had potential for such things as "ghost photography," "spooklights," UFOs, and other occasionally nocturnal or "invisible" phenomena. We also started collecting schematic diagrams for a variety of experimental electronic devices which might aid our quest. Magnetometers, for example, were given high priority for their potential to detect the alleged intense magnetic fields often associated with UFO encounters. In the area of audio electronics we used various amplifiers and parabolic microphones as specialized adjuncts to conventional cassette tape recorders--improvements that were most valuable on some of our cryptozoological endeavors.

In addition to developing our own research equipment, Bob and I schooled ourselves to be aware of what other types of scientifically accepted technical tools were available to us. We learned that organizations like the United States Geological Survey, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Colorado Bureau of Mines, and the National Bureau of Standards were amazing repositories of maps, charts, photographs, data logs, and scientific reports that complimented, intersected with, or related to various unexplained phenomena, with many of these reference materials being available at minimal cost or free for the asking.3

MYSTERIOUS LIGHTS

Hebron

During 1979, and '80, the Enigma Project busied itself with the research and investigations of mysterious lights. Often referred to as ghostlights or spooklights--due to the attachment of an invariable death stigma, these nocturnal phenomena became quite a fascination for us. Much to our delight, Bob and I discovered that Maryland's Eastern Shore was the home of several such lights. Throughout the late '70s and early '80s we devoted much attention to the Hebron Light (Hebron, MD), Elsey's Light (Crisfield, MD), and Cal's Light (Andrews, MD). Having first learned of the (now defunct) Hebron Light through a mention made in Mysterious Fires and Lights by Vincent Gaddis (Mackay- 1967), we performed literature searches on the

alleged phenomenon and journeyed to Hebron for actual interviews of original witnesses. We learned that on a hot July night in 1952, members of the Maryland State Police were involved in what might be termed a bizarre "cat and mouse" encounter with a 10 inch sphere of yellow light. In their cruiser, two officers closely approached and then chased the luminous ball down a local road before it mysteriously vanished. Although media coverage of the phenomenon persisted for about two weeks beyond the main event, our investigation showed that a mandate was issued to the Salisbury barracks from Maryland State Police Headquarters in Pikesville that a any further confrontations with the light be kept under wraps. We subsequently discovered that this strange light had made sporadic appearances near the town of Hebron for many years prior to the '52 encounter, although the Maryland State Police episode has remained the most remarkable case on record. Due to the obvious integrity of the witnesses, this incident remains an outstanding example of Maryland mystery. Unfortunately, because the phenomenon has been inactive for so many years (locals say since the mid 1960s), Enigma Project investigators were not able to perform a firsthand examination of it.4 It was, however, our good fortune to have secured an interview with Robert Burkhardt, one of the two officers who chased the light. While Burkhardt (now retired from the police force) was very reluctant to discuss all the details of the 28 year old experience, he made it quite clear that the encounter represented one of the most bizarre and "trying" episodes of his life.

GEOLOGIC ANOMALIES

Gravity and Magnetic Hills

As a young child I occasionally heard stories about a place you could go where your car (out of gear, brakes off) would be pulled up a hill, as if by some invisible power. This place was called "Gravity Hill" and it was somewhere in Baltimore County. In January, 1980, the Enigma Project managed to rediscover Gravity Hill as being in northwestern Baltimore County along a public road which ran through the Soldier's Delight environmental area. Sure enough, as we experienced firsthand, if you positioned your car at the bottom of the apparent rise on Gravity Hill, and left it in neutral with the brake off, it would very decidedly roll up the road--as if in defiance of gravitation--for about a tenth of a mile before stopping. To naked eyes, at least, the slight grade in the road did go up, and with it so did vehicles positioned on its surface. These circumstances clearly presented a dilemma which the Enigma Project felt obligated to explore.

Fortunately, one of the Enigma Project's local associates, Mike Gilbert, was a surveyor by profession and we wasted little time in getting him to assess the anomaly. Mike examined the road with a transit and carefully marked it off, making notes all the while. When finished he presented us with a drawing of his survey, the results of which were quite surprising. The road's slight "rise" was, in fact, a "fall." Yes, contrary to what the eye perceived, Gravity Hill was actually a decline. Summarily, we learned that it was not a place where Nature's laws go awry, but rather, a unique location for an optical illusion. Evidently, the lay of the land, the sway of the trees, and so forth set the stage for an unusual, though not mysterious, error in visual perception.5 Interestingly, at least three additional gravity/magnetic hill locations in Maryland6 (they have not been thoroughly investigated) have come to the attention of the Enigma Project and we have heard about other

locations throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Ringing Rocks

"Something is frightfully wrong here," wrote anomalist Ivan T. Sanderson as he referred to the Ringing Rocks in his provocative book,Things. Using perhaps a bit too much schmaltz, Sanderson was describing a seemingly out of place, seven-acre field of barren, tumbled boulders located in Upper Black Eddy, a tiny, northeastern Pennsylvania town near the New Jersey state line. As if a seven-acre, ten feet thick, layer of stones in the middle of a peaceful forest wasn't bad enough, Sanderson further confounded the reader with fact that about 30% of those stones would ring like bells when struck with hammers!

While the ringing propensity of the rocks has since been shown to be caused by high internal pressure due to an unusual and selective weathering process, a number of claims and counter-claims made about the rocks and their field have held the subject in debate.

In 1981, Enigma Project researchers went to the Ringing Rocks field to evaluate the strange place for themselves. Our basically empirical findings, which were eventually published in Fate Magazine8, agreed with most of Sanderson's observations. For example, we found that either breaking the rocks or removing them from the delicate environmental stasis of their field did not stop their ringing properties--a strong contradiction to what some scientists had insisted. We also agreed (with Sanderson's assertion) that the rocks would ring whether clamped or suspended, since there were ringers in the field clearly wedged by other rocks weighing tons. We did, however, disagree with Sanderson's claim that all lifeforms (except man, that is) avoid the field. Project investigators found examples of spiders and garter snakes living among the rocks and even a couple of young saplings that had managed to take root.

In all, we don't know how "frightfully wrong" the Ringing Rocks are but we will concede that they and their field are unusual and, as is the case with most phenomena, definitely controversial.

NEW PERSONNEL

Between the acts of defying gravity, rock ringing, and light chasing, 1981 also found us welcoming three new associates to the Enigma Project. They were Sydney Ellis, Gloria Denick, and George Walls. Each of these individuals has contributed to the uniqueness, accomplishments, and identity of the group.

Ms. Ellis, an electronics assembler living in western North Carolina, was instrumental in the Project's investigations of the Brown Mountain Lights, a South Carolina "meteorite" crash, and other Carolinian oddities. She has devoted her time to many field excursions.

Ms. Denick, a nurse who works with the visually handicapped in New Jersey, is well read in the practices of astrology and has aided the Project by performing library/archival research and field excursions for the Brown Mountain Lights and the Marfa Lights.

Mr. Walls, a recently retired engineering executive and scientist who served AT&T in New Jersey for more than three decades, has supported Enigma with many aspects of engineering strategy, instrumentation design experiments, and field excursions to North Carolina, Texas, and many other places.

paraPSYCHOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

In the fall of 1981, Enigma Project researchers were referred to a gentleman (let's call him Mr. Q) in Perry Hall, Maryland who was allegedly having, what some authorities might term, demonic manifestations and/or poltergeist activity in his attractive suburban house (an averaged-sized, two- floor Colonial). A woman living with Mr. Q (let's call her Betty) was experiencing episodes of violent personality changes (more suggestive of schizophrenia than demonic possession) which included menacing contortions of her facial features and rapid utterances in an unearthly, raspy voice. Also, both individuals claimed to have witnessed household objects flying about the place under their own power as well as appliances going on and off by themselves.

Bob Lazzara, with Holmes-like analytical prowess and a knowledge of parapsychology (honed by other experiences before we met), headed the investigation and began considering rational explanations for the alleged phenomena that plagued the house's forelorned occupants. Nonetheless, the familiar culprits of house settling, faulty wiring, local construction dynamiting, sonic booms, and so on just didn't fit. Publicity seeking was not the easy answer either as Mr. Q wanted no parts of the media. Bob's questioning of Mr. Q yielded none of the classic answers which literature would ascribe to hauntings and related paranormal disturbances. For instance, no one had ever died in Mr. Q's house--he was the original owner, nor was it built on "sacred Indian ground" or a cemetery. As Bob pressed on for details, Mr. Q and Betty both explained that her episodes of "possession" were recent developments but seemed to be occurring with greater frequency (as witnessed by officers of the Baltimore County Police department).9 They did not, however, appear to be linked to any unusual "religious" practices, changes in lifestyle, or interests in the occult. Bob carefully questioned Betty about any history of mental or physical health problems and she, just as carefully, denied having any. Despite the apparent sincerity of the principals, Bob had a "gut feeling" that something just didn't ring true.

After two exhausting months of investigation--which included all-night vigils in the house using cameras, audio and video recorders, infrared devices, and other electronic gadgetry--we could not substantiate any of the principals' claims. Finally, during another round of Lazzara's persistent questioning, Mr. Q made a confession. He sadly admitted that Betty had not only a brain tumor but a drinking problem as well. These combined maladies caused her periodic changes in personality. The claims of objects and appliances paranormally misbehaving were entirely Betty's. She would hallucinate and Mr. Q, not wanting to admit to himself (or anyone else) that she had some serious problems, would corroborate her imaginary claims.

At least in the beginning, Mr. Q believed there was some substance to Betty's allegations of something "strange" being in the house. He was hoping against hope that we would somehow arrive at the same conclusion.

CRYPTOZOOLOGY